



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

Parshat Mattot-Mase'i: Fighting Fair

Rabbi Marianne Novak
Class of 2019

In the current political climate, it seems that everyone, from all points of view, has forgotten how to have a fair fight. Dr. Phil McGraw (yes, **that** Dr. Phil), lays out nine rules for couples to have fights that are fair and productive.

- 1) Take it private and keep it private
- 2) Keep it relevant
- 3) Keep it real and clear
- 4) Avoid character assassination
- 5) Have a goal in mind for a resolution
- 6) Allow for your partner to retreat with dignity
- 7) Be proportional in your intensity.
- 8) Set a time limit for the argument
- 9) Maintain control

("How to Fight Fair, If You Don't, It Could Mean Divorce", Dr. Phil McGraw, Huffington Post, Oct. 20, 2014)

At the end of Matot, the first of our Parasha double header this week, the Torah describes the continuing journey of B'nai Yisrael following their successful defeat of Midyan. Laden down with some of the booty from their victory, including a great deal of cattle, Moshe and the Jewish people, inching ever close to their goal of the Promised Land, finally arrive at the fertile land on the eastern side of the Jordan river. The tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe, cattle farmers who now had even more cattle from the Midyanite conquest, are concerned for their flocks and the appropriate amount of grazing lands that would be available in the land of Israel proper. Seeing the abundant land in front of them, they approach Moshe, Elazar the priest and the princes of the tribes and say, (32:4-5) 'the land that the LORD has conquered for the community of Israel is cattle country, and your servants have cattle. (32:5) It would be a favor to us, -they continued-if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan.'

The tribes' claim here seems at face value to be quite reasonable. They stick to the 'fair fight' rules.

- 1) They keep it somewhat private in addressing only those that are necessary.
- 2) They keep it relevant and real and state very specifically their goals and the reasons behind them.
- 3) They maintain respects for the other parties, don't engage in character assassination and provide a solution for their issues.

The text does not indicate the tribes having a tantrum or losing control. It seems all rather civilized at that point.

Moshe's response, however, seems to violate all the fair fight rules. Moshe begins by saying (32:6)..'Are you brothers to go to war while you stay here?' This seems to go against the directive of Keeping it Relevant as the tribes didn't mention anything about not going to fight. They just want to be able to take care of all their cattle. Moshe's answer deteriorates further as he engages in a complete character assassination not only of Reuven, Gad and half of the tribe of Menashe but of all of B'nai Yisrael saying,(32:7): 'Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the LORD has given them? (32:8) That is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to

survey the land. (32:9) After going up to the wadi Eshcol and surveying the land, they turned the minds of Israelites from invading the land that the LORD had given them.’

Moshe angrily compares these tribes to the *miraglim*, the spies, hinting that this request might result in God punishing B’nai Yisrael again having them wander another forty years in the desert. Moshe ends his rant by losing his control saying, (32:14), ‘And **you**, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to the LORD’s wrath against Israel. (32:15) If you turn away from Him and He abandons them, once more in the wilderness, you will bring calamity upon all his people.’

Moshe’s reply is the epitome of a disproportionate response. The tribes simply asked for grazing land. Moshe launches this diatribe not only after a reasoned request but from a group that is the remains of all the trials and tribulations, every sin, misstep and rebellion, that Moshe and B’nai Yisrael have endured for 39(!) years. Clearly this group is not trying to rebel, or leave the fold, as they have truly bought into Moshe and God’s vision for the Jewish people. Moshe, however, speaks to them as if they were re-enacting the sin of the spies. It is after Moshe’s harsh words, that the tribes stare at Moshe in stunned disbelief. In the Torah *claf* itself, there is a physical break in the text, a paragraph, possibly symbolizing the tribes’ reaction and the subsequent kindness in letting Moshe calm down and regroup.

While there may be a number of reasons of why Moshe is so cranky here, what is more interesting is his response **after** his tirade. After Moshe and the tribes take a time-out, both sides come to a calm and reasoned agreement. The Tribes propose that they will build homes for their wives and children and facilities for their livestock on the opposite side of the Jordan. In consideration for the rest of B’nai Yisrael, they will provide troops to help with the conquest of Eretz Yisrael. The tribes promise they will not go back to their homes until the rest of the people are settled into their portions in the Land and additionally relinquish their share of land in Israel proper.

As Erica Brown and Tzvi Grumet note, Moshe’s willingness to compromise and not hold too tightly to his dream of all the tribes crossing over the Jordan together, lets him remain a great leader, even after delivering his concerns in an admittedly unfortunate way. He is not necessarily a leader on the decline, but a pragmatic and ever evolving one. In addition, the tribes’ ability to plead their case a couple of times also shows the evolution of the Jewish people as a whole. They neither head for the hills nor, as Dr. Phil would say, ‘kick him [Moshe] to the curb.’

It is in this spirit of compromise, adaptive leadership, and maturation that God brings the Jewish people to the promised land - a land where B’nai Yisrael can live lives that sanctify God’s name and embody human decency, and at the very least show the world how to have a fair fight.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her BA in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women’s Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women’s Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.